

San Antonio As a Face of the Future

A Model City's Approach to Health and Wellness

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As Mayor of San Antonio, I have devoted significant time in office to changing health-related perceptions and instilling a local culture that embraces fitness and better nutrition. Preventable conditions like diabetes and obesity have kept too many San Antonians from reaching their full potential and living a life of dignity. Through a lot of hard work, we are turning the corner. Residents increasingly understand that health and fitness are crucial quality-of-life issues. Public health officials know that wellness initiatives and preventive care are far less costly than more serious health problems that are often treated in hospital emergency rooms, which is why the prevention research led by *Salud America!* at the Institute for Health Promotion Research at the UT Health Science Center at San Antonio is both extremely necessary and worthy of support. The business community also appreciates that a healthy workforce is a productive workforce. This comprehensive buy-in from all sectors of the community is the only way to achieve a success that can be replicated in other communities.

What we do in San Antonio is important for the rest of the nation. Demography tells us that San Antonio is the New Face of the American Dream. The nation's seventh-largest city looks today like the Texas of the next decade and the America of 2040 and beyond. We are a majority-minority city that is 63% Hispanic, 27% non-Hispanic white, and 7% African American. And not unlike other large American cities, significant pockets of our community live in poverty and are decidedly young. Nineteen percent of San Antonio's population live below the poverty level, and more than 74% of the city's residents are under the age of 50.¹ These facts pose significant challenges, but they also represent opportunity. As America begins to experience a similar demographic shift, San Antonio will be a unique example that other communities can look at to predict and test behavioral and programmatic changes.

In 2010, San Antonio embarked on a quality-of-life visioning process called SA2020. Thousands of individuals representing every walk of life worked together to

prioritize community goals. Those goals formed the basis for long-term human and capital investments. In the health and wellness category, citizens were clear that the overall health of our citizenry was a top priority and in need of a comprehensive, consistent, and robust set of strategies to combat public health threats like obesity and physical inactivity. In just one generation, it was noted that our community experienced a tripling of the childhood obesity rate. And in Bexar County, more than two thirds of the adult population are overweight or obese and more than one third of children are overweight or obese.

So what are we doing about it? Two years ago, I established the Mayor's Fitness Council (MFC) with the purpose of transforming San Antonio into a healthier and more active community by creating a volunteer army of advocates. I asked Amelie G. Ramirez, one of San Antonio's (and the nation's) foremost leaders in promoting prevention and fitness, to co-chair the council. Our city now is benefitting from her expertise as the director of *Salud America!* and from her research-driven mindset in the field of Hispanic health. She has pushed for collaboration on a community level to guarantee real and sustainable results. The thinking around the establishment of the council was: If we are going to make real progress, it must be a bottom-up, grassroots movement not a top-down government program. The MFC recruited more than 200 volunteers representing every sector of the community to think about the resources, opportunities, and tools needed to make fitness and healthy eating a part of daily life. This coordinated effort allowed the City of San Antonio to strategically leverage the resources of the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) initiative, which was funded by a \$15.6 million federal stimulus grant. The CPPW initiative included the creation of the Active Living and Food Policy Councils, whose missions included bold approaches to changing policies, systems, and the environment for a healthier San Antonio.

The Mayor's Fitness Council also set about to provide community leadership and oversight to initiatives such as Síclovía, Fitness in the Parks, FitCitySA.com, San Antonio Walks, the Student Ambassador Program, and the San Antonio Business Group on Health, to name a few.

Fitness in The Park offers more than 360 free classes to the public and has installed fitness equipment in 22 parks and five libraries throughout the city. We have

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also taken measures to enhance neighborhood fitness opportunities by improving walkways and intersections, providing safe and accessible routes to schools, developing and augmenting walking trails, and adding biometric machines in libraries. Perhaps most notable, San Antonians have embraced the B-Cycle bike-share program, which is now ranked as the second-busiest B-Cycle location in the nation with an average of more than 6700 riders per day logging a total of more than 106,000 miles.

Our strategy on childhood obesity recognizes that children often do not control food choices. For that reason, we focused on where children spend most of their time—in school. Through the involvement of the San Antonio Metro Health District and area school districts, more than 108 salad bars have been installed in San Antonio schools over the last 18 months. At the same time, we have moved forward with innovative programs like the *¡Tiendita Por Vida!* program, encouraging corner stores in low-income areas to add fresh produce to their food selections. This effort dovetails with the *Por Vida* initiative, which showcases restaurants that provide healthier menu items and promote those options to their customers. Other programs such as The University of Texas Health Science Center's CHURN (Child Health Unified Research Network) program integrate

healthy eating habits into the community through the planting of community gardens. Additionally, farmers markets across San Antonio are now accepting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) debit cards, allowing for even more access to nutritious alternatives.

In a nutshell, we are turning the corner in San Antonio because we are no longer working in silos. The keys to our strategy have been community awareness and collaboration. Through that collaboration, San Antonio's health and fitness trajectory is on the upswing. Continued momentum will mean that future generations of San Antonians will have better health outcomes and an overall better quality of life. And if we get it right here, the rest of America will be able to take a page from our book.

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Reference

1. U. S. Department of Commerce. Demographics for the state of Texas. quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4865000.html.

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